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B(ordering) Utopia in Birobidzhan: Spatial Aspects of Jewish Colonization in Inner Asia

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ABSTRACT

The borderline territory serves a double purpose, being simultaneously zones of cultural contact and cultural barriers—administrative and often civilizational. This ambivalence frequently affects borderline area inhabitants turning them into hostages of border management regimes and outside projections concerning their cultural and civilizational status, and the authenticity of forms of their culture representation. In the case of Birobidzhan, we are dealing with an absolutely modern project of creating ethnic territoriality without reference to the historical context and far from the places of traditional settlement of the Jewish population. The implementation of this project put the Jewish settlers at the center of a complex process of border management and securitization of the border areas. The factors of border and “remoteness” are largely underestimated in Birobidzhan studies. The article fills this niche, emphasizing the spatial aspects of the implementation of the “anti-Zionist utopia” and its complex relationship with previous models of territoriality in the region and local inhabitants.

KEYWORDS

Birobidzhan, settler state, Inner Asia, Border Studies

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Birobidzhan is undoubtedly one of the most unusual cities in the Far East of Russia. A tourist visiting the Jewish Autonomous Region¹ will be surprised to see symbolic traces of the Jewish presence, Yiddish inscriptions and monuments to Jewish writers. Cultural policy in the region plays freely with its Jewish past, often reinventing it and creating the appearance of an intense revival of Jewish culture (Maksimowska, 2009). Over time, it will inevitably see the slightly phantom character of Russia's most Jewish city. Most residents have very conditional ties with Jewish culture, do not use Yiddish in their daily lives, and perceive Jewish scenery as regional specifics. Despite the mass exodus of Jews after 1991, the region continues to reproduce its special status and preserve its unique history. In this perspective, the rare enthusiasm for Birobidjan and the frequent criticism in the categories of inconsistency reflect the ambivalent nature of the place that could not become a full-fledged republic for Jews, but cannot stop being one, constantly re-inventing its past.

The vast literature devoted to the trajectories of the Jewish resettlement project in the Far East has left aside the spatial aspects of the project (Dekel-Chen, 2007; Estraiikh, 2019; Gurevich, 2020; Weinberg, 1998). By adopting the "empty territory" postulate, the researchers ignored the project's border localization and its deep ties to the tsarist and Soviet border regimes. Studies of the borders of Inner Asia (Peshkov, 2012) provide an opportunity to fill this gap by presenting the essential role of the border regime for all stages of the project's existence. Localization in the border zone has largely determined the main factors of its development. The securitization of the border areas turned the region into a semi-empty territory, the irrevocable closure of the border increased remoteness, and the culture of border mobilization² made it possible to manifest state anti-Semitism in the most aggressive form not found in other areas of the USSR.

This perspective will help us to look at the creation of Jewish settlements in the Far East from an unexpected angle, showing the complex relationship of the new formation of immigrants with alternative models of territoriality in the region. An equally important task of the article is to de-colonize (Tlostanova, 2008) the dominant perspective of the Birobidzhan project research, in which the colonial categories of empty land, useless territory, natives, and comical distance from the center are accepted as legitimate descriptions of reality. All the classic features of the colonization project (the absence of historical roots, remoteness from places of compact residence, the desire to occupy empty space, the invisibility of local residents) (Balandier, 2010) in the descriptions of Birobidzhan appear as a heavy

¹ The ambitious and world-known Soviet Project of Jewish Autonomous Region (JAR) in the Far East was established in 1934. The main city and symbol of the project was Birobidzhan, which was founded in 1928 based on the railway station called Tikhonkaya. Birobidzhan was Evenks' name (Бира бид(ж)енэ), and meant a nomad camp at the Bira River. The Project of JAR resulted from searching a pattern of Jewish autonomy in Soviet Union, which linked the elements of Zionism, Soviet model of national autonomy and socialist ideas of secular Jewish settler state and secular Jewish culture. The Soviet propaganda used the slogan "To the Jewish Homeland" to inspire Jewish workers from USSR, Europe, South and North America to participate in development of new socialist Jewish Land. For many reasons (hard leaving conditions, repressions, bad logistics and paranoia against international supporters) mass migration was stopped.

² Special cultural policy aimed at permanent emotional inclusion the border population in the defense of the boundary.

challenge to fate or even as punishment from the state. This shows that the colonial roots of the project have never been questioned and are still automatically transferred to scientific discourses.

The tragic history of the Jewish migration (Gessen, 2016) does not exclude Birobidzhan from the colonial archive of the Far East. The very situation when participants of the previous colonial project are destroyed or discriminated in the frame of a new model is typical for both Russian and Soviet models of frontier management. The role of the border management regime is key here: each change has led to the marginalization of some communities and the temporary ascent of others. The Russian border in the region was largely based on Cossack settlements; the Soviet regime of border management leads to disappearance of the Cossacks; the Jewish population is rapidly dissolving in the flow of new immigrants; and the post-Soviet model of the open border marginalizes the former residents of the border regions, leaving them without jobs and clear life priorities. Moreover, a slight weakening of the exclusivity of the Jewish project and its inclusion in the general logic of the cultural and administrative development of the region will allow a broader view on the problems of the past and present of the region. In this perspective, the inclusion of "colonialism of the weak" in the new imperial history of the region is a challenge both for historians of the region and for comparative studies of Jewish migrations. The localization of the Jewish project in the colonial archive of the Far East will provide an opportunity to show the tragedy of Birobidzhan in a broader perspective of the tension between the practices of national zoning, securitization of borders and the search for models for development of remote regions.

Border and Colonialism: from Russian to Soviet Version

The assumption of the target ethnic, confession and political coherence of the borderland area is crucial for the Russian (Tsarist) and Chinese (Qing) colonial experience in Asia, which based on agrarian use of nomadic frontier land and re-orientation of indigenous nomadic population towards colonial Centers by controlling the transborder movement, the separation of religious institutions from the authorities outside borders, state support for migration and active militarization of indigenous population. But these policies included the nomadic communities in new forms of modernity. The railways, airplanes and motor vehicles not only connected areas remote from the centers with national geography of industrial development, but also manifested the state's ability of modernization. The external modernity (in late imperial, nationalist and socialist versions) was manifested as complex of discourses and practices oriented toward the transition remoteness areas in coherent part of national body. The strong competition in Inner Asia between Russia/USSR, China and Japan has a strong connection to spectacles of great logistic and industrial projects. This fighting with "backwardness" and "remoteness" created the new forms of temporality and spatiality, which transformed the today "remoteness and backwardness" into space of development strictly connected with national economy. In the Far East case, the "coherence" in borderland was understood as a

Russia-oriented agro-nomadic space with the essential role of military institutions (Cossacks) and cultural domination of Orthodox communities (Peshkov, 2012).

With the victory of the Bolsheviks in the civil war, the situation changed in border areas to model of border-bastion. The center orientation and closed character of the Soviet space turned borderline areas into half-empty places remaining in absolute readiness for confrontation. Frontier forms of socialism were special not only because of the extremely intense implementation of Soviet methods of modernization, but also because they reached a particularly high level of political and social sterility of frontier population (Peshkov, 2014). According to the Soviet outlook on the world, borders were viewed as a source of danger and an area of confrontation with the enemies. The fact that the neighboring countries were political opponents of the USSR legitimized militarization of borderline regions and limitlessly fueled the civil war atmosphere. The model of frontier socialism was characterized by closed-border policy, special attention from state authorities to the supervision of border communities (special rights, movement control, the propagandist idea of a border as a bastion, etc.), and a very strong connection between socialist modernization and militarization of the area (on the economic, cultural and social levels).

Mass migration from the Centre together with the spread of primary education in socialist schools had the effect of marginalizing the hybrid culture of the border regions and sharply accentuating the cultural distance between the Russian and Chinese sides of the border. The incoming new populations began to dominate, bringing with them an absolutely different geographical imagination and gradually creating new forms of identity. The socialist conceptualization of a border (as a limitation of legal space and separation from the outside world) legitimized the military style of governing and the special attention paid to the governing of economic activity. The experience of the socialist border was in many ways re-formed, not only as regards its present but also as understandings of the past (Peshkov, 2018). Both theoretically and historically, borders have never been fixed categories and the ways of their conceptualization and location have varied depending on time and space. Border conceptualization constitutes an integral part of society's identity determining the processes and rituals of its integration to a considerable extent. State versions of history are also strongly determined by processes of borders defense and legitimization. In the Far East case, the main categories of border imagination were "waste areas" (waiting for colonizers) and quasi-invisible indigenous population (waiting for gift of Modernity). This led to amnesia and years of blindness to the region's pre-colonial past.

Who is the Owner of the "Waste Land"? Production of the Invisible

A common feature of all settler states is the involuntary nature of relocation and the transformation of a new place into own territory (Cooper, 2010). Locals in this perspective become "victims of victims", turning into an obstacle on the way of progress or becoming an exotic scenery for tourists. In this perspective, the case of Birobidzhan is special, being a classic example of the settler formation (two waves of refugees

from anti-Semitism); it simultaneously becomes a hostage of ethnic status and almost immediately turns into a subaltern settler formation. The specificity of this situation is the constant politicization of the Jewish question (ties with foreign countries, Zionism, cosmopolitanism, sympathy for Israel), which turns Birobidzhan into a trap for the remaining Jews (Gurevich, 2020). This type of formation (especially after the World War II) creatively combines the colonial status of the owners of the territory with the “forbidden life”³. The irony of the situation is that the Birobidzhan migrants practically did not enjoy privileges and, if possible, helped discriminated groups⁴. Nevertheless, this “human-faced colonialism” had all the features of a colonial situation: the empty space waiting for Jewish settlers long before they arrived was stripped of its past and the locals became the setting for a new project. This explains the situation that, despite the contradictory policy of the Center towards Jews, it is the Jewish identity that is reproduced in the Soviet conditions. Other stories and identities were simply erased.

The answer to the question who originally was the owner of the territory of today’s Jewish Autonomous Region is quite complex. It should be noted that this place is a reservoir of failed colonization projects. As an integral part of the Manchu lands, it was annexed under the Treaty of Aigun (1858) and the Beijing Convention (1860). This acquisition leads to a sharp outflow of the population and disruption of economic ties. Most of the Manchu and Chinese leave the territory. Only the *Evenki* [Evenks], who retain their cross-border status, stay.

The place of the Chinese and the Manchus should be taken by the resettled parts of the Transbaikalian Cossacks, but weak organization and ill-conceived infrastructure leads to the failure of the project. The Cossacks’ standard of living is rapidly falling; the area becomes a symbol of difficult life conditions and backwardness. At the same time, the flow of Korean refugees reaches the region and the number of the Koreans is rapidly increasing.

Together with the October Revolution (1917), the question of the status of the territory becomes much more complicated. Chinese leaders take both treaties as unequal, seeing the region as lost territories. Significant part of the Cossacks and Koreans support the Far Eastern Republic (1920–22) and see the future of the region in the framework of a moderate socialist project in alliance with Russia (Sablin, 2020). Even more of the Cossacks join ataman Semyonov⁵ and hope for the inclusion of

³ After the World War II, the USSR rapidly changed its policy towards Jews. From a country where the Jewish population enjoyed all rights and was even the object of an affirmative policy, the USSR is shifting towards state anti-Semitism (hidden behind slogans about the friendship of peoples), reinforced in the 60s by anti-Israeli policy. This situation turns the JAR into a trap, the only Jewish unit in the USSR must survive the full burden of responsibility for Zionism.

⁴ The relations between former Cossacks and Jewish immigrants largely destroy the stereotype of a constant conflict between the two groups. After the negative and tragic experience of the civil war, Jewish immigrants were surprised to discover the Cossack subculture without anti-Semitic agenda. Mutual support and mixed marriages have led to the emergence of subcultures and biographies impossible for other regions.

⁵ Grigory Mikhailovich Semyonov (b. September 13(26), 1896, d. August 30, 1946) was a leader and a controversial symbol of the anti-communist Transbaikalian Cossack uprising. After the collapse of the White Movement, he was forced to abandon Far East in September 1921. After the Red Army entered Manchuria, he was captured and executed, following a long investigation. The Soviet propaganda connected him to all forms of resistance against the communists in Transbaikalia, Mongolia and Inner Mongolia.

the region in his political projects, and after emigration—in the Japanese plans to create a frontier state under the Japanese protectorate. Due to the small number of indigenous people, they hardly participate in political processes, continuing to use the forest as a cross-border zone, where they have always been the masters. In this perspective, the history of the region is a cascade of exceptions, subject to changes in the border regime. Each subsequent change leads to the crossing out of the previous state and the effect of an empty land, where everything starts over. Except the Evenks, all other participants of this process perceive the region as a place of potential development or preservation, without much regard for local conditions. The Manchus see it as a protected area, preserving sacred places and real customs (Di Cosmo, 1998)—here the related Evenks turn into guardians of the Manchu power. For Russian administration—it is as an empty space that needs to be populated by Cossacks and peasants. For the government of the Far Eastern Republic, it is a forlorn corner which needs rapid modernization. And for the Far Eastern atamans—these are the Cossack lands in need of support.

This combination of orientation towards future and the impossibility of fundamental changes in the present has largely determined the trajectory of projects in the region. In addition to objective factors (weak infrastructure, long distance from the centers, limited opportunities for international exchange and insufficient population), the peripheral nature of regional development projects for China and Russia, and to a lesser extent for the USSR, played a huge role. In this perspective, the history of the region resembles the myth of the colonial Sisyphus. Endless efforts are drowned in new projects, participants of previous projects disappear, the memory of the past is very sparingly recorded by the local museum. This colonial present was created long before the October Revolution by the joint efforts of the Manchu and Tsarist administrations. The main difference between the Chinese and Russian projects is the attitude towards the indigenous peoples of the region.

The modern history of Evenks is related directly to the Sino-Russian border management in Inner Asia. The Russian conquest of the Transbaikalian region resulted in a long-term migration of Tungus tribes to the south (Hulunbuir in China) or north (Yakutiya in Russia). The transborder character of the nation has resulted in the clash of two official versions of Evenks culture and the dependence of official historical discourses about Evenks' origin on Sino-Russian relations. In this context, the Evenks indigenism has a very modern origin since it resulted from Russian and Chinese border management. Imperial cultures see the history of a small transborder nation differently. From the Chinese point of view, Evenks are included in the state historical narrative by "Evenkizing" the archaeological artifacts of the region and emphasizing the role of the Evenks in the history of the Northern China. The ambivalent nature of the nation's image gives the possibility of a specific "division of labor": the northern Evenks symbolizes the authentic culture; the history of southern Evenki symbolizes the nation's contribution to defending China's frontiers against Russian Expansion.

The Russian version defines the Evenks as a people exposed to danger stemming from their backwardness and the resulting lack of preparation for living in the contemporary world. Both the state and the society position themselves

paternalistically as guardians of confused and vanishing nomads. Such perspective is deeply rooted in Russian culture and has resulted in an interesting combination of sentimental sympathy over the poor Tungus' fate and absolute indifference as regards constant and prolonged practices of controlling Evenks' agency through territorial barriers, inconsistent state development policy and disintegration of weak ethnopolitical institutions. The Evenks stereotype in Russian culture has been shaped by post-Soviet museums and local cultural projects emphasizing permanent "traditionality" of indigenous cultures. Museum exhibitions and generally available information show the Evenks from an external viewpoint of an educated European viewer who is supposed to admire the legacy of old cultures. The sentimental image of the noble Tungus in Russian culture, which requires protection from modernity and Chinese merchants, with all its warmth only strengthens the idea of "people of nature" who do not need to be asked for permission to use their land. Any contact with civilization is a blessing in this perspective, and they should be grateful to visitors for a chance to be developed. This exotic image of a peripheral community completely excluded them from the political agenda and the status of the owners of the territory.

Since the Birobidzhanians have already developed the de-Evenkized territory, the Evenks are perceived as a distant exotic. Except for a few traditional costumes in the local museum and some statistics from pre-WWII reports, the region literally does not see the Evenks past of the territory. If the former Cossacks have become invisible to the State, but not to the Jewish residents of Birobidzhan, the Evenks, while remaining a recognized subject of state policy, continued to be invisible to the community. When I asked about the indigenous inhabitants of the region, local historians replied that there were few natives and they did not know anything about them. People spoke warmly about Evenks, but with protectionist notes (using the colonial term *tuzemtsy* [natives]), having no idea about their life and culture.

The destructive effects of state modernistic strategies towards communities defined as backward were clearly showed in development studies (Peshkov, 2004). The compulsory choice of the modernity instead of the autonomy allows the state to exclude the so-called "backward communities" from the legal boundaries in order to implement randomly established "absolute right" of communities to modern models of life (Scott, 1998). This biopolitical perspective situated state in its ability to call for a state of exception and a temporary suspension of rights. The radical expansion of a legal boundaries connected with transition to modern models of economic activity can be combined with simultaneous turning of the economic, cultural and social rights within paternalistic logic of development. The possibility to stop the economic, social and cultural rights in order to fight against "backwardness" shows not only their contextual nature, but also the priority of the state's right to biopolitical sovereignty. Common for all forced modernization projects was the imperative of linear movement from backwardness to development. In this context, the traditional culture of the communities was perceived as an obstacle to development and the main source of economic backwardness.

The idea of an empty space is not neutral and carries an unambiguous political declaration: only inclusion in modern life brings indigenous peoples out of the state

of savagery and gives them rights. Until this happens, they are perceived as part of nature, not directly related to large processes. In addition, empty lands are designated as cleared of indigenous peoples. All participants in the modernization attempts (except the Manchus) perceived and continue to perceive the indigenous people as wild people of the forest, related more to nature than to politics. The Birobidzhan case is very important for colonial research. In this situation, the “invisibility” of local residents is not directly related to either mass migration or the urbanization of the region. This once again shows the strength of the cultural formations of colonialism and their ability to produce negative effects, even if the colonial project fails.

The second group of “invisibles” is the “old settlers” communities of the region. The appearance of Russians in Inner Asia resulted in the development of new forms of ethnic and cultural identity based on cultural syncretism and miscegenation of the members of the analyzed groups with the inhabitants of the region. These mixed communities need to keep the balance between Russian culture and the elements of the indigenous one. The specificity of Eastern Transbaikalia as regards most part of its population was the overlapping of the quasi-indigenous status and the Cossack estate. After 1858, Transbaikal Cossacks was replaced to Amur River. After the end of Civil War, the hostile attitude of the communist authorities to the Cossacks (*raskazachivaniye* [decossackization], *raskulachivanie* [dispossession] and deportations), and the new socialist border regime provoked radical ethnic and social changes in the area. In that context, active border cleansing policy finally isolated the new Soviet Far East from old social and cultural structures.

The first three decades of the new system were particularly traumatic for the analyzed groups. Their mass migration to China began in 1918 and initially it concerned only richer Cossacks escaping to avoid decossackization practices. A large percentage of Cossacks in the first immigration wave established the models for perceiving migrants to borderline territories for a long time (they were perceived according to their origin and political views). Soviet propaganda for many years defined both countries of exile as places of refuge of politically active White Cossack emigrants. We are dealing with a special situation here, i.e., mixed ethnic groups favored by the previous colonial system became the victims of both organized and unorganized violence despite the simultaneous activation of the new ethnic and racial order (Peshkov, 2012). Mixed communities that originated as a result of one colonial and modernizing project were consciously and systematically eliminated after the introduction of another.

Utopia and Settler State: Far Eastern Version

The Soviet proclamation of the Jewish Autonomous Region in the Far East was a historic event not only for the region, but also for the whole world (Kuchenbecker, 2000). The young Soviet state proclaimed the first Jewish ethno-political structure with its own territory, its own administration and cultural policy (Gitelman, 1988). This communist response to the Zionists has stirred up the Jews all over the world (Kotlerman, 2009). Despite its modest status as an “autonomous region about to

become a republic,” Birobidzhan was an exclusive Soviet project. From the point of view of external observers, it was a state within a state: its international status and the historical experiment in the transition of the Jews to agriculture made it a real alternative to Palestine and projects of non-territorial autonomy (Patek, 2007). It is important to pay attention to the performative aspects of the proclamation—a remote area, not affected by urbanization, becomes a place of international effort and an important factor in international politics. Creatively combining the national and the class (Maksimowska, 2009), it was open to Jewish youth from everywhere and for a surprisingly long time (by Soviet standards) received technical and financial assistance from all over the world. The Soviet project of Jewish autonomy was to combine Jewish dreams of their own land with the demands of a new society: Jewish culture was to become modern, proletarian, and secular. The language of autonomy becomes Yiddish (Estrakh, 1999), the main branch of Jewish agriculture, the station Tikhonkaya turns into a town Birobidzhan (1937) with a rich theatrical and literary life. The combination of two utopias (national and communist) from the very beginning determined the specifics of the new life. The absence of Jewish history in the region freed up the imagination and possibilities for cultural experimentation. If the old life remains in the Pale of settlement, then the new life can be represented in any way. Hebrew was distrusted as the language of obscurantism and reaction, and religion was rejected as unnecessary for a new life. In this perspective, the paradoxes were written into the Birobidzhan project from the very beginning (Kotlerman & Yavin, 2007). Birobidzhan was anything but a *shtetl*. The mass fascination with agriculture, the absence of synagogues and Jewish entrepreneurs became a way of new life and preparation for communism on their land.

The two utopias listed above were in a complex relationship throughout the history of Soviet Birobidzhan, and at some point, the national one had to submit completely to the requirements of the party conjuncture. The disaster of the project was due not only to the lack of conditions to accept most of the Jews of the USSR, but also to the growing suspicion towards Jews from the government after 1945. Birobidzhan suddenly becomes a place of persecution of Jews: people are persecuted for using Yiddish in teaching, literature or theater (Gurevich, 2020). The culmination is the public burning of Jewish books in the main square of the city—despite the Holocaust, being a Jew becomes suspicious for the Soviet state and society. This transition from a state of affirmative action towards Jews to a semi-official state anti-Semitism was matched by the evolution of the project from a Soviet promised land to a territorial trap seized by a dangerous name and a wariness of everything Jewish (Gurevich, 2020). The influx of new Jewish population stops, but the region retains part of the cultural infrastructure and constantly balances between the culture of working Jewry and Zionism. Despite a very controversial policy, the post- WWII years were a period of rapid growth of the quality of life. Until the end of the Soviet Union, the state remained suspicious of Jews, reinforced by the remoteness and dominance of military institutions. The region almost did not notice *perestroika*, continuing to catch the Zionists and anxiously testing itself for loyalty to a large country.

In this perspective, the proclamation of Jewish Autonomous Region was an attempt to build its own territory within the USSR and permanently erase the history of Jewish exile⁶. The failure of this project does not negate its role in the history of Jewish colonization. Consciously or unconsciously mixing Zionist aesthetics with Soviet optimism, the region had to create a new person capable of forcing the harsh taiga to retreat and conquering the earth for a new life (Gurevich, 2020). Unlike Palestine, the Far Eastern project was not balanced by the idea of returning to native land. The land was given by the Soviet state, which made the entire project defenseless against changes in the Soviet political course. The gift of the Soviet state demanded reciprocity and gradually turned the owners of the territory into semi-invisible beings.

The example of Birobidzhan can tell us a lot about the problems of the settler society with the justification of its presence as the owners of the land. When historical arguments do not work, and the places of compact settlement are thousands of kilometers away, the performative aspects of the act of proclamation become the main one. It can be assumed that, as in the case of other Soviet ethno-political structures, the center and the region read the same declarations differently. The very localization in the “Soviet Brotherhood of Nations” made any national project completely dependent on the will of the center and its changeable approaches to the national question. Here the situation is complicated by the very position of the new formation—dependent on international aid, populated by a large number of foreigners and separated from cultural centers, the region was from the very beginning a foreign body in the system of managing national issues. The example of Birobidzhan provides an opportunity to take a fresh look at the Soviet national policy and its consequences. There are no final winners and losers, cultural dominance in the region does not mean security; any form of strengthening of ethno-political structures raises suspicions of disloyalty and nationalism. In this perspective, local nationalisms were subject to constant control and discipline, which gave rise to the effect of an unfulfilled desire in the republics.

This largely explains the spread of affective forms of nationalism after the collapse of the USSR. No less important is the example of the Jewish Autonomous Region in understanding the difficult combination of Soviet forms of colonialism with the proclamation of the equality of nations and the renunciation of the “dark tsarist past”. All the communities that the migrants met became invisible or disenfranchised. The Cossacks were repressed as White Guards and spies, the Chinese and Koreans were deported, the Evenks were practically not included in the process of developing the region. Regardless of the status of “a former” or “invisible” person, the population of the border region was subjected to forced marginalization and deprivation of rights (Feferman & Epstein, 2010). We can talk here about the trap of a migrant in projects subordinated to external management: agreeing to the arbitral elimination of the rights to land of previous residents—he remains one-on-one with the state. The migrants themselves will quickly turn into phantom subjects, subjected to a severe test and to the expectation of atonement for the Soviet society.

⁶ Performative effects of declaration (see: Derrida, 1984/1986).

Conclusion

Studies of the past and present of the Jewish Autonomous Region considered the project of resettlement of the Jewish population to the Far East in several overlapping perspectives: the reasons for the resettlement, its dynamics and scale, repression and the policy of state anti-Semitism after 1945, the impact of the confrontation with Israel and the problems of preserving and inventing Jewish culture in the region. In addition, a fairly large archive of memories was collected, revealing to us all the contradictions of the “Promised Land” in the USSR. Much less attention was paid to the spatial aspects of the Jewish colonization project—its relation to previous models of colonization, the local population, the Soviet security policy of border territories and relation to the imperial and Soviet models of colonial development of the periphery.

The proposed attempt to show a broader perspective of the resettlement project provides an opportunity to take a fresh look at the Russian model of presence in Inner Asia. The experience of the Jewish Autonomous Region shows that a colonial cultural formation can exist without the use of violence and even with a certain sympathy for the local population. The rejection of one-sided prospects for overcoming the backwardness of the region (where yesterday’s owners of the territory turn into an obstacle to development) can be a step towards the decolonization of consciousness and the revision of the colonial experience of the region. In this context, decolonization means, first of all, the rejection of the rationalization of repressive policies, finding of a balance in relations with indigenous peoples, and the rejection of the idea of the region as a white sheet on which a migrant from Eastern Europe writes his history.

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